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# Identification Systems for Beef Cattle

Before the advent of performance testing there was little need for individual identification of beef cattle. Only purebred cattle were numbered and then only to record ancestry. As a need to identify individual cattle for performance developed, identification systems were invented. These systems were relatively unsophisticated at first. If two cows had the same number, the breeder could usually tell them apart by other means and no trouble was encountered. With the introduction of the computer, it became apparent that each animal would have to have a unique number. Most people simply adopted the purebred numbering system and found it satisfactory. Owners of some of the larger herds wanted to find a system whereby the calf could be numbered the same as the cow for management purposes. Each system had advantages and disadvantages.

## Purebred tattoo system

Purebred herds are assigned a series of letters called herd letters which identify each breeder belonging to that particular breed association. These letters usually correspond to the initials of the breeder or his ranch name. The herd letters are usually 2, 3 or 4 letters in length. Different breed associations may issue the same herd letters.

Following the herd letters, the breeder uses numbers to identify each animal. Most breeders number the first calf born as "1" and then proceed to number subsequent calves in order. This helps to determine the relative age of calves later on in the year when the birth dates are not always at hand.

To identify the year of birth, the use of a letter has become standard among all breed societies in the United States and Canada. Some letters that resemble numbers are omitted (I, O, Q, V). Beginning in 1989, the year letters to 1993 are Y, Z, A and B. As an example of the tattoo system using the herd letters RJB, the first calf born in 1989 would be RJB 1Y. The last born of 93 calves would be tattooed RJB 93Y.

Tatto numbers are often placed on readily visible ear tags, providing positive field identification.

## Commercial version of the tattoo system

Since commercial cattle are not registered by breed societies, the herd letters are unnecessary; however, many commercial cattlemen use a system similar to the purebred system with good results. Omitting the herd letters, they number their cattle with consecutive numbers and the appropriate year letter. This number appears on the ear tag and serves as a unique number for the life of the animal. The federal/provincial ROP program for commercial cattle does issue commercial herd letters for computer reasons but it is not necessary to use these letters on the animal tag. If a cow is purchased that has a tag number already used in the herd, the purchased cow can be renumbered without complication.

## Year number system

This system eliminates the year letter code and replaces it with a number corresponding to the year of birth, ie. 87 for 1987, 88 for 1988, etc. With this system, it is necessary to be consistent and always put the year portion of the number at the beginning. A sample sequence for a herd of under 100 cows with calves born in 1988 could be 8801, 8802, 8803...8899.

Some people have tried to use only the last digit in the year as the code (eg. 7 for 1987). The major obstacle with this system is that the year number repeats itself every 10 years. For example, if you had a few 12-year old cows born in 1977 in the herd when replacements enter in 1989 as 2-year old heifers, the year code number would be the same (7) for both groups. A duplicate number could result. This would be unacceptable for a computerized ROP program.

The best solution would be to use the two number year code (eg. 1988 = 88) even though this may require larger ear tabs to be adequately visible.

## Renumber system

Some very large ranchers have difficulty identifying which cows and calves belong together without the aid of a birth record book. When a calf gets sick, they like to take both the cow and calf to the sick pen. The birth record may be large and if observation rounds are made by horse, such a book would probably be cumbersome. The renumber system solves this problem by giving the calf a current year letter and the same number as the cow, making pairing easy.

The biggest problem with this system is that re-

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placement heifers often have to be renumbered when they enter the breeding herd (ie. cow 12A gives birth to 12C. 12A stays in the herd. 12C enters. Both give birth to a 12E two years later). This problem is solved by renumbering the replacements when they enter the herd.

If you wish to keep track of ancestry with the renumber system, provision must be made for the identity change of the replacement heifers. By issuing a new number to a heifer, her own record as a calf is liable to be lost unless additional book work is done to record the number change. It also involves additional expense in retagging.

## Registration number

Some breeders have used the registration number to identify cows for a ROP program. This is not recommended. The registration number does not appear on the cow, making interpretation of the results difficult in the field without a code book. Finally the key punching of registration numbers causes many of the time-consuming errors at the data processing centre.

## Recommendations for identifying cattle for ROP

- Use the tattoo system. The purebred or the commercial tattoo (tag) system is the best system to identify cows and calves when involved with ROP. It is relatively simple to use at home or for the ROP program. Both systems allow replacements to enter the herd without a change of number.
- Use the tattoo and/or registration number for bulls. The complete tattoo is as good a method of identifying a bull as is the registration number where the breed of bull is given. Identifying the bulls used in a herd is encouraged. The sire summaries generated within a herd can be a useful culling/selection tool. The information made available to the National Sire Monitoring program for AI sires will also help identify good (and bad) performance of sire progeny.
- Stay on ROP. If you don't like any of the numbering systems recommended, use whatever system you like, but stay on and use ROP. Keep improving your herd through a sensible selection program. A suitable ID system makes the job easier.

For further information contact the Animal Breeding Section, Beef Cattle and Sheep Branch, Alberta Agriculture, Edmonton.

**Note: Important**

Use of numbers branded on cattle has certain limitation as per The Brand Act. The act allows for use of numbers only if the animal is carrying a recorded registered brand. These numbers must be placed on the same side as the recorded brand. The reason for this is that there are still a few number brands registered. To place numbers on without an accompanying brand could result in branding cattle with someone else's registered brand.

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